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AUDITOR-CONTROLLER

**COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES  
DEPARTMENT OF AUDITOR-CONTROLLER**

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TO: Supervisor Don Knabe, Chairman  
Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke  
Supervisor Gloria Molina  
Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky  
Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich

FROM: J. Tyler McCauley   
Auditor-Controller

**SUBJECT: BISON DEATH AT WILLIAM S. HART PARK – CASE #2005-0091**

On August 3, 2004, your Board directed the Department of Parks and Recreation (Parks), the Office of Public Safety (OPS), the Department of Animal Care & Control (Animal Control), and the Sheriff's Department (Sheriff) to work with the Auditor-Controller to investigate the death of a bison at William S. Hart Park (Hart Park). I subsequently assigned this matter to my Office of County Investigations (OCI). This report summarizes findings presented by the investigating agencies, and detailed facts and conclusions developed from our own review.

**Background**

On July 27, 2004, a healthy 1½ year-old male bison was found dead inside a latched corral at Hart Park. The bison was part of an eleven animal herd owned and managed by Parks. Because of suspicious circumstances surrounding the bison's death, OPS was asked to conduct an investigation. On July 30, 2004, a Sheriff's Detective was assigned to assist OPS, and on August 2, 2004, Animal Control also joined the investigation. Each participating agency submitted their findings to Parks at the conclusion of their respective investigations. Parks then prepared a draft report summarizing the consolidated findings.

**Scope**

The purpose of our investigation was to reconcile issues of fact between reports from each participating agency, and to address questions and inconsistencies in the varying accounts of the bison death. OCI investigators reviewed each Department's findings, including evidentiary and supporting documents related to this incident. We also interviewed Parks, Animal Control, OPS and Sheriff staff, and private citizens. OCI investigators also made an unannounced visit to Hart Park, and conducted a physical review of the bison habitat and corrals.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Neither our investigation nor the reports of other investigating agencies could determine how or why the bison died, primarily because Parks ordered the carcass destroyed before a necropsy could be performed. We believe this decision was premature given what appeared at the time to be suspicious circumstances surrounding the death. As a result, while OCI investigators later concluded these suspicious circumstances likely had no nexus to the incident, we could not rule out the possibility of foul play as there was no necropsy.

The investigating agencies concluded the most likely scenario preceding the death involved the bison entering an open corral and somehow becoming trapped. Environmental conditions may also have been a factor, as the temperature on the days preceding the bison's death ranged from 90 to 100 degrees, and the corral where the bison died was not shaded and did not contain food or water. We found no evidence to contradict these findings. In addition, veterinarians consulted during the investigation indicated that bison are highly susceptible to stress, and that separation from the herd, lack of food/water, and high temperatures could have caused the Bison's vital organs to shut down. According to one veterinarian, such circumstances could kill a bison in 48-72 hours.

Our investigation identified substantial deficiencies in Parks handling of this incident, resulting from an absence of codified policies and procedures related to animal safety and the investigation of animal deaths. In addition, the fact that animal feedings/counts are not adequately documented impaired our ability to reconcile conflicting statements by witnesses and Hart Park employees as to the bison's whereabouts in the days before it died. Private citizens claim they observed the bison locked in a corral, while Hart Park employees stated it was observed, on a few occasions, in the free range habitat. Despite these discrepancies, both parties appear to be credible. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, we were unable to verify the accuracy of their observations.

Ultimately, questionable judgment on the part of Hart Park staff in not responding timely to reports of an animal being eaten by coyotes, their subsequent failure to order a necropsy, and their premature decision to dispose of the bison carcass resulted in the destruction of evidence. This precluded any determination as to the true cause of death.

### **Additional Issues**

During the course of our investigation, we received additional allegations that animals at Hart Park are not being appropriately cared for. In addition, on September 23, 2004, another bison died at Hart Park. Our review of that death is included in this report.

**Animal Care**

As noted during OCI's investigation, several individuals expressed concern about the quality of care that animals are receiving at Hart Park. OCI staff made an unannounced visit to Hart Park, during which all animals appeared to be well cared for and healthy. However, we lack the expertise to make a fully informed assessment. Due to Animal Control's expertise in this area, we requested they review these allegations and report back to my office with findings and recommendations for changes to Hart Park procedures, staff qualifications and training requirements. We will provide your Board with the results of their review.

**Second Bison Death**

On September 23, 2004, an approximately 40 year old female bison was found dead in the free range section of Hart Park. Necropsy results indicated the female bison died of a copper deficiency and old age. Hart Park staff are working with a veterinarian to ensure the remaining bison are receiving an appropriate diet.

**Corrective Actions**

We are referring findings related to deficiencies in Parks policies and procedures to that Department for corrective action. We noted Parks has begun developing and implementing new procedures to ensure the safety and proper care of animals at Hart Park. Specifically, physical security over the bison habitat is being improved, and documentation of animal feedings/counts has been strengthened. Parks' new policies and procedures should also define emergency situations and establish procedures to properly handle them. If fully implemented, the new procedures should ensure future emergencies and suspicious animal deaths are handled timely, and in a manner consistent with best practices for such investigations.

We have requested that Parks management keep us apprised of their progress in implementing these corrective measures. Please call me or have your staff call Marion Romeis at (626) 293-1400 if you have any questions.

CONSOLIDATED R-2005-0091-D.DOC  
JTM:MO:MR:da

c: David E. Janssen, Chief Administrative Officer  
Violet Varona-Lukens, Executive Officer  
Audit Committee Members  
Public Information Office

**Investigating Agencies**

Leroy D. Baca, Sheriff  
Margaret York, Chief, Office of Public Safety  
Marcia Mayeda, Director, Department of Animal Care and Control  
Russ Guiney, Interim Director, Department of Parks & Recreation

## **Bison Death at William S. Hart Park**

### **Background**

On July 27, 2004, a healthy 1½ year-old male bison was found dead inside a latched corral at Hart Park. The bison was part of an eleven animal herd owned and managed by Parks. Because of suspicious circumstances surrounding the bison's death, the Office of Public Safety (OPS) was asked to conduct an investigation. On July 30, 2004, a Sheriff's Detective was assigned to assist OPS, and on August 2, 2004, Animal Control also joined the investigation. Each participating agency submitted their findings to Parks at the conclusion of their respective investigations. Parks staff then prepared a draft report summarizing the consolidated findings.

### **Scope**

The purpose of our investigation was to reconcile issues of fact between reports from each participating agency, and to address questions and inconsistencies in the varying accounts of the bison death. OCI Investigators reviewed each Department's findings, including evidentiary and supporting documents related to this incident. We also interviewed Parks, Animal Control, OPS and Sheriff staff, and private citizens. OCI investigators also made an unannounced visit to Hart Park, and conducted a physical review of the bison habitat and corrals.

### **Findings**

Staff from my Office of County Investigations (OCI) reviewed Parks' consolidated report and each agency's investigative findings. In addition, OCI investigators investigated some questionable/suspicious circumstances that were not resolved in the agencies' reports. Based on these reports and our additional investigation, following are the results of our review and a chronology of events.

At approximately 8:00 p.m. on July 26, 2004, a Hart Park neighbor saw a coyote eating a bison and called the Sheriff. Sheriff's dispatch referred the neighbor to OPS, which subsequently referred her to an Animal Control number only answered during regular business hours. Unable to contact Animal Control, the neighbor spoke to a friend who, through a series of calls, relayed a message to the Hart Park Animal Keeper.

At approximately 8:40 p.m., the Hart Park Animal Keeper received a call that a bison was down and was being eaten by coyotes. However, the Animal Keeper decided not to respond immediately because he did not believe the caller was credible, felt he could not take any action in the dark, and feared for his safety. Therefore, he did not arrive at Hart Park until 5:00 a.m. on July 27, 2004. At that time, he and another Hart Park employee found the bison dead inside a latched corral. They noted some unusual circumstances which led them to question whether the death of the bison was accidental. The Acting Hart Park Superintendent was on vacation and did not return until the next day, July 28, 2004. As a result, Hart Park staff notified the Assistant Director of Parks North Agency (Assistant Director) of the suspicious circumstances.

She instructed them to notify OPS. A Sheriff's Detective and Animal Control staff joined the investigation a few days later.

The suspicious circumstances observed by Hart Park staff included:

- The bison was in a latched corral without food or water, and a hose was draped over the bison's neck. Bison are not usually kept corralled, but are instead allowed to roam.
- There did not appear to be any bison excrement inside the corral, suggesting the bison had not been confined for an extended period.
- Numerous tennis shoe prints were observed in the corral and surrounding areas. Hart Park staff typically wear boots.
- An empty Co2 cartridge, of the type commonly used in pellet, BB, paint ball and tranquilizer guns, was found approximately sixty yards from the corral.

Hart Park staff and OPS officers examined the bison and found no visible wounds, other than the damage caused by coyotes. There were no strangulation marks and, according to Hart Park staff, they had previously strung a water hose across the corral. Officers concluded that the hose draped over the bison was not suspicious, and that the bison likely put its head under the hose.

A Sheriff's Detective examined the corral and observed the gate opened both ways, did not have a self closing mechanism, and was not secured with a lock. While in the latched position, a bison would not be able to open the gate and could become trapped. However, if left unlatched, a bison could open the gate and enter the corral. The Sheriff's Detective concluded that the bison got into the corral and inadvertently pushed or nudged the gate closed, engaging the latch. As a result, the bison would have been trapped inside the corral. He also noted that the corral was not shaded, and that the high temperatures on the days preceding the bison's death ranged between 90 and 100 degrees.

OPS' report indicates that only one defecation sample was found in the corral. OPS officers suggested that the absence of food and water would have reduced the number of bowel movements. Defecation samples could also have been trampled into the soil, making them unrecognizable. OPS noted that the corral showed evidence of freshly moved dirt, and on the south side of the corral, closest to the pasture, a deep, freshly made row was visible. Public Safety officers concluded that this indicated heavy traffic likely created by a pacing animal.

A Sheriff's Detective concluded that the tennis shoe prints found adjacent to the corral gate were not unusual because tennis shoe prints were also found in free range areas of the Park. However, the Sheriff's report does not explain how individuals wearing tennis shoes got into this area, which is fenced with access limited to Hart Park staff.

According to Hart Park staff, they always wear boots. OCI investigators visited Hart Park and conducted a physical review of the bison habitat and corrals. OCI investigators noted several areas where fences separating the bison habitat from a public path were bent over. Hart Park's Animal Keeper also told us he has seen people in the free range area on a number of occasions, and assumed they climbed over the fence. Given the condition of the fence, it appears likely that unauthorized individuals climbed over it to access the bison habitat and corrals, which would explain the presence of tennis shoe prints.

The Sheriff's Detective determined that the likely source of the Co2 cartridge was a young man who had been using his paintball gun in the area where the cartridge was found. The young man told the Detective that he had discarded some of the cartridges on the ground. Therefore, the Sheriff's Detective ruled out any relationship between the cartridge and the bison's death.

### **Interviews**

OPS, Sheriff and Animal Control staff interviewed two civilians, who on separate occasions reported seeing a bison locked in the corral, without food or water, on the afternoons of July 24 and 25, 2004.

OPS, Sheriff, Animal Control and OCI staff also interviewed several Hart Park employees. Two of the employees stated that they counted the bison at least once each day, and that they accounted for all eleven bison in the free range portion of the Park on at least four occasions between July 24 and 26, 2004. One employee insisted all eleven bison were in the free range area of Hart Park at approximately 6:30 p.m. on July 24, 2004. Another employee stated he counted all eleven bison on July 25 and 26, 2004, at the 5:30 a.m. feeding, and again in the afternoon of the 26th. Hart Park staff also reported that their morning count is recorded in the Hart Park Feed Chart. However, investigators noted that the corrals are not entirely visible from the feeding location, and that the Feed Chart is only annotated with a check mark that a count was completed. In addition, the morning counts/feedings are done at about 5:30 a.m. OCI investigators noted that sunrise occurred at approximately 6:00 a.m. on the days the civilians observed the bison in the corral. Therefore, the morning counts would have been performed before daybreak and in low light conditions, and could have been inaccurate.

According to OPS, Sheriff and Animal Control staff, the civilian witnesses had no reason to lie about seeing the bison in the corral, and were believed to be credible witnesses. They also emphasized that each witness, on separate occasions, saw the bison in the same corral where it was later found dead. However, Hart Park staff remain firm that their counts were accurate. The investigating agencies' reports provide no explanation for the discrepancies between the statements of the civilians and Hart Park staff.

### **Disposal of Bison Carcass / Necropsy**

OPS' report indicates that in the absence of any policy identifying the steps to be taken when a bison dies, Hart Park staff, on the morning the bison was found dead, called a

local veterinarian and inquired if blood could be taken and analyzed for a cause of death. The veterinarian's secretary, in consultation with the veterinarian, confirmed that blood could be analyzed, but only if taken within 20 minutes of the bison's death, because blood begins to gel after 20 minutes. Since the bison had been dead for several hours, Park staff could not draw blood.

OPS officers completed their Report of Suspicious Circumstances and advised Hart Park staff they could dispose of the carcass. A disposal service was called and the carcass was removed on the afternoon of July 27, 2004. OPS' report indicated that a Parks Assistant Director made the decision not to order a necropsy because of the cost. OPS contacted several veterinarians and they were told a necropsy could have determined the cause of death even if the bison had been dead for several days.

The Assistant Director denies that she did not order a necropsy because of the cost, and told OCI investigators that the issue of requesting a necropsy was not discussed until the day after the bison's carcass had been removed. The Assistant Director stated she told the Hart Park Animal Keeper to assist OPS and remove the carcass at the completion of their investigation, with their approval. OCI investigators confirmed that the veterinarian's secretary did not discuss a necropsy with Hart Park staff until the next day, July 28, 2004. Upon learning that a necropsy could still be performed, Hart Park staff contacted the disposal company to reclaim the carcass, but was told it had been destroyed.

### **Disgruntled Employee**

Reports prepared by each investigating agency reference comments by Parks staff that a former, disgruntled employee, who has connections at Animal Control, might have obtained drugs to sedate/kill the bison. However, only Animal Control staff investigated this issue. They conducted an inventory of pharmaceuticals at the Castaic Shelter, and determined that none were missing. However, neither the former supervisor nor the contact at Animal Control was interviewed. In addition, OCI investigators previously assisted Parks with an investigation into alleged thefts of Hart Park supplies and unauthorized removal of animals from the Park by the former supervisor. Several of the allegations were substantiated, and Parks initiated disciplinary action against the supervisor on July 12, 2004, two weeks before the bison was found dead.

OCI and OPS staff interviewed the former supervisor, who was represented by an advocate from the Service Employees International Union, Local 660. The former supervisor denied being involved in the death of the bison, or having any knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the incident. OCI and OPS staff found no evidence to suggest the former supervisor was involved in the bison's death.

### **Parks' Report**

Parks conducted their own investigation, and agreed with OPS, Sheriff and Animal Control findings that the death of the bison was not the result of a deliberate act. Parks concluded that staff at Hart Park acted in accordance with informal Departmental practices in reporting the bison's death and disposing of its carcass. We agree that

there is no specific evidence the bison's death was intentional. However, we do not agree that Hart Park staff handled the incident properly. Specifically, we noted that:

- Daily feeding/count logs did not contain sufficient information to determine who conducted the feedings/counts, or when they were done.
- The Animal Keeper failed to respond timely or notify a superior that a Hart Park animal was being eaten by coyotes.
- Hart Park staff failed to order a necropsy, even though the bison died under suspicious circumstances.
- Hart Park staff had no written policies or procedures, other than United States Department of Agriculture regulations, to provide guidance on animal care and control.

Parks is working to develop and implement new procedures to improve animal safety and help ensure proper handling of future emergencies and suspicious animal deaths. Specifically, Parks has begun implementing the following changes at Hart Park:

- Animals will be counted three times per day.
- Each count will be recorded on the Daily Feed Chart, and will document the time of the count and the signature of the staff making the observation.
- Padlocks were added to each corral gate within the bison area, and corrals not in use are now locked closed.
- The fence surrounding the bison area will be replaced or raised, and razor wire will be added to deter unauthorized access.
- Signs will be posted in strategic locations along the park's perimeter advising the public to contact OPS if they observe suspicious activity or animals which appear to be in distress after normal business hours.
- Written policies and procedures for handling animal deaths and the disposal of carcasses will be established.
- Written policies and procedures regarding emergency situations after regular work hours will be developed

### **Conclusion**

Neither our investigation nor the reports of other investigating agencies could determine how or why the bison died, primarily because Parks ordered the carcass destroyed before a necropsy could be performed. We believe this decision was premature given



what appeared at the time to be suspicious circumstances surrounding the death. As a result, while OCI investigators later concluded these suspicious circumstances likely had no nexus to the incident, we could not rule out the possibility of foul play.

The investigating agencies concluded the most likely scenario preceding the death involved the bison entering an open corral and somehow becoming trapped. Environmental conditions may also have been a factor, as the temperature on the days preceding the bison's death ranged from 90 to 100 degrees, and the corral where the bison died was not shaded and did not contain food or water. We found no evidence to contradict these findings. In addition, veterinarians consulted during the investigation indicated that bison are highly susceptible to stress, and that separation from the herd, lack of food/water, and high temperatures could have caused the Bison's vital systems to shut down. According to one veterinarian, such circumstances could kill a bison in 48-72 hours.

Our investigation identified substantial deficiencies in Parks handling of this incident, resulting from an absence of codified policies and procedures related to animal safety and the investigation of animal deaths. In addition, the fact that animal feedings/counts are not adequately documented impaired our ability to reconcile conflicting statements by witnesses and Hart Park employees as to the bison's whereabouts in the days before it died. Private citizens claim they observed the bison locked in a corral, while Hart Park employees stated it was observed, on a few occasions, in the free range habitat. Despite these discrepancies, both parties appear to be credible. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, we were unable to verify the accuracy of their observations.

Ultimately, questionable judgment on the part of Hart Park staff in not responding timely to reports of an animal being eaten by coyotes, their subsequent failure to order a necropsy, and their premature decision to dispose of the bison carcass resulted in the destruction of evidence. This precluded any determination as to the true cause of death.

Parks is in the process of developing and implementing new procedures to ensure the safety and proper care of animals at Hart Park. Padlocks now secure each corral gate, the animals are counted three times per day, feeding/counting documentation has been strengthened, and bids have been solicited to improve or replace the fence surrounding the bison area. Parks' new policies and procedures should also define emergency situations and establish procedures to properly handle them. An emergency should include the death of an animal under suspicious circumstances. Hart Park staff should be required to immediately respond to emergencies and require a necropsy for each suspicious animal death. The new procedures, if fully implemented, should increase animal security and ensure future incidents are handled properly.

**Additional Issues****Animal Care**

During OCI's investigation, several individuals expressed concern about the quality of care that animals, particularly the larger animals, are receiving at Hart Park. They believe that current staff at Hart Park is not qualified to care for the animals, evidenced by the fact that a missing bison apparently went unnoticed for several days, and that a Recreation Services Leader, instead of a Park Superintendent, is responsible for operating Hart Park.

We determined that while it is true the current Hart Park supervisor is a Recreation Services Leader, not a Park Superintendent, she appears to have substantial experience caring for animals. The Recreation Services Leader has previously worked at Placerita Canyon and Vasquez Rocks, where she was directly involved in caring for a variety of animals.

OCI investigators made an unannounced visit to Hart Park on August 31, 2004, and did not see any obvious signs of neglect or mistreatment of the bison or other animals. All appeared healthy and well fed. In addition, we were told that many of the animals had been raised from infancy or "rescued" by Hart Park staff and nursed back to health. However, we lack the expertise to a fully informed assessment on the care of animals. Therefore, we have requested Animal Control to review the animal care and control, and staff qualifications and training issues at Hart Park and report back to us with their findings.

**Second Bison Death**

On September 23, 2004, an approximately 40 year old female bison was found dead in the free range section of Hart Park. Public Safety and Animal Control were notified and the carcass was transferred to the California Animal Health and Safety Lab in San Bernardino for a necropsy. The necropsy disclosed that the female bison died from a copper deficiency and because of old age. Hart Park staff are working with a veterinarian to ensure the remaining bison are receiving an appropriate diet.